Combining Video and Performance: A Double Performative Engagement

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A friend of mine recently commented that my video project "Family History Textbook" (Figure 1) reminded her of a work she saw at this year's Venice Biennale, "Mother + Father" by South African artist Candice Breitz (Figure 2). I can see how she would make such a connection: not only do both videos employ the talking-head form, they are also about the same topic – family relationships. "Mother" and "Father" are installed in two separate rooms, each consisting six TV monitors showing clips from Hollywood films where the protagonist talks about his or her role as a parent. Breitz has skillfully re-edited the clips so that the actors seem to escape from their films to speak and react to each other's words. The video in my work "Family History Textbook" also contains six chapters. In winter 2004 I asked five of my family members each to tell a childhood story. I then added the last chapter about my biological father, who passed away a long time ago, but a short description of his childhood was recently found in the "Application to Join the Communist Party" he wrote in 1966. Like Breitz, I also manipulated the footage – imitating the way my family members spoke, I dubbed their voices in the video.

Despite formal and thematic similarities, however, my work is fundamentally different from Breitz's. Whereas Breitz produced her work on her editing station using Hollywood footages, my work was the result of interactions and negotiations with my family members. Whereas the core of Breitz's effort is the creation of the video, which is only subsequently offered to the viewer as an object, I am most concerned with the process, the process of

communication that I was able to engage my family in.

Indeed, I consider my work much closer to two other recent works by Chinese artists – Yang Zhenzhong's "I will die" (Figure 3) and Luke Ching's "Easy to Learn Cantonese, Chapter 1 I love you" (Figure 4). In each work, the artist engaged a large number of people as his collaborators in creating a video. In the Chinese-edition produced in 2000-01, Yang asked

Figure 1 "Family History Textbook" by Bo ZHENG, 2004-05

Figure 2 "Mother + Father" (part) by Candice BREITZ, 2005

Figure 3 "I will die" by YANG Zhenzhong, 2000-01

Figure 4 "Easy to Learn Cantonese, Chapter 1 I love you" by Luke CHING, 2000-03

44 Shanghai residents to repeat the statement "I will die" in front of the video camera. Ching's project was completed during his residency at PS1 in New York in 2000. He conducted classes with 400 visitors in his studio and taught them to say "I love you" in Cantonese. After each class he recorded the pronunciation of each student into a five-second video.

I would like to argue in this essay that these projects should be considered as performances each with two acts – the first act is staged during the production phase of the video and the second one inside the gallery space when the video is exhibited. In these projects, video functions as a pretext, a surrogate and a byproduct. These works serve as examples to illustrate one recent approach in combining video and performance to not only engage different social groups outside the gallery space, but also create a reflexive linkage between them and the viewers inside.

1. The staging of two acts

Grant Kester observed in his recent book "Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art" that a number of artists have "parted from the traditions of object-making" and adopted "a performative, process-based approach" (1). Video, as a time-based media, is advantageously positioned to support artists in process-based projects. Yet when a video is included, many critics continue to focus on the video, treating it solely as a sequence of images and a stream of sound, rather than recognizing it as an accomplice to

the artist in a communicative process with those involved in the production of the video. A paradigm shift is required to understand projects like "I will die."

"I will die" can be described as two performances linked by a video. The first performance happened within a specific time frame and site – 2000-01 in Shanghai. Equipped with his video camera, Yang Zhenzhong engaged a number of people in various locations – a subway station, an office, a bar, a hospital, and so on – and asked each person to perform the simple task of stating "I will die" for the camera. Afterwards, Yang produced the video with minimal editing.

When the video is exhibited – in a non-specific time and location – the second act of the performance is realized. The viewers encounter the same Shanghai residents whom Yang faced in the first act. I want to stress the performance nature of the second act, achieved through simple framing of the shot, prominent use of first person pronoun, and deliberate emphasis on eye contact between the person making the statement in the video and the viewer outside. Thus the viewer is not reviewing a video documentation of an event that has completed in the past, but rather watching a performance that addresses him or her at that particular moment.

The two acts are interdependent. It is obvious that the second performance requires the video produced in the first act, but equally, the first performance is only possible because the artist, together with his or her collaborators, anticipates the second performance act. These

projects differ from other video art in that the artwork is already in motion during the production phase of the video; they differ from other performance art in that the artwork extends beyond the completion of the first performance act for as long as the video can be replayed.

2. First act - camera as a stimulant

Requesting people to perform certain tasks is not a new artistic invention. Street performers have long employed this interactive trick to transform audience members from outsiders into participants, thus dramatically reducing psychological distance. In late 1960s artists like Bruce Nauman adapted this approach to create installations such as the "Performance Corridor." These projects not only turned viewers into participants, but also required them to follow a set of actions prescribed by the artists. Early performance artists also used this technique in their experiments with the body, as Marina Abramovic demonstrated in her work "Rhythm 0" in 1974 – participants were asked to perform any action they liked with objects in the room on the artist's body. Later the emphasis on body and movement gradually gave way to "image-centered performance and a return of language" (Carlson 116).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, as Hal Foster observed, influenced by social movements and development of critical theory, artists broadened the scope of art to include areas traditionally associated with ethnography and anthropology. "The subject of association has

changed: it is the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the committed artist most often struggles" (173). The artist retreated to the backdrop and the spotlight focused on his or her collaborators. The site of engagement also migrated from theater or gallery to include a diverse set of locations inhabited by the participants, such as an urban street corner in Gillian Wearing's project "Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say" (Figure 5). She handed a piece of white paper to each person she stopped and left the person to decide whether he or she was to make a personal confession or a grand political statement.

Figure 5 "Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say" by Gillian WEARING, 1992-93

Wearing's work evidenced another important development central to the three projects I am discussing in this essay. Different from earlier performances, where a group of people gathered in an enclosed space and one person's action was watched by the rest of the participants, here the interaction occurs only between the artist and the person he or she encounters (the collaborator). More crucially, a camera is introduced, functioning as a surrogate audience. The action of the collaborator is induced only partially by the artist; the presence of the camera was a quiet accomplice asserting both pressure and stimulation. The

performance of the collaborator exists because of and for the recording apparatus.

Let's try to imagine Yang Zhenzhong conducting his project without a video camera. He would go into a doctor's office in a public hospital, introduce himself, and request the doctor to say "I will die" aloud. He may very well succeed in convincing the doctor, but what the doctor would experience is far less profound than what we now observe in the video – sitting tall and straight and looking intensely into the camera, the doctor pronounced "I will die" with a sense of pride, almost bordering on arrogance. His desire to perform for the potential audience was apparent. At the same time the camera seemed to have transformed into the representation of death, future, or a mirrored image of himself. Was he implying that, with his medical background, he is absolutely unafraid of the unavoidable end?

In my own project "Family History Textbook" the video camera functioned as a platform for communication. My sister broke into tears recalling the year she spent with my biological father in Hubei province before he passed away. I had always seen her as a cheerful and outgoing person, and never realized how traumatic an effect the death of our father had on her. The video recording provided a personal space, a non-judging listener, and an indirect conversation. Alternatively, I could have asked family members to sit around a table to share childhood memories, but most definitely I would not succeed in overcoming barriers of "normality" that contemporary culture has installed in us.

Jean Rouch, a pioneer in direct cinema, made the following observation: "Very early on

I discovered the camera was something else; it was not a brake but let's say, to use an automobile term, an accelerator... Some of the people who saw the film ["Chronique"] said the film was a film of exhibitionists. I don't think so. It's not exactly exhibitionism it's a very strange kind of confession in front of the camera, where the camera is, let's say, a mirror, and also a window open to the outside" (qtd. in Renov 83). How do we harness the power of the camera to provide the opportunity for people to share their stories and emotions, without turning the instrument into a monster, coaxing people to reveal sensational materials merely to create spectacles? Gillian Wearing, in "Confess all on video" (1994) explored precisely the difficulty in distinguishing between confession and fantasy. She recruited people through newspaper advertisement and provided wigs and masks to help disguise their identities. Stories told by these "confessants" closely resembled tabloid thrills and classical crime cases.

Michael Renov suggests that first-person confession, where the speaker is given "center stage" and allowed "unexpurgated self-disclosure" in "nonhegemonic contexts," differentiates video confessions that communicate from those that entertain (97). The critical factor, in my mind, is an aligned motive between the artist and the collaborators. The artist can identify and adopt an issue that his or her collaborators are already concerned with, or frame a new issue for the collaborators in such a way that all possible disguises are stripped away, both literally and figuratively. Unlike my family project, Yang and Ching did not give extensive confessional space to their collaborators, yet the bareness of the tasks, the profundity of the

statements, and the awkwardness felt by both the artists and the collaborators allowed no room for deception.

3. Second act – encountering the viewer

The second performance act depends on video's power to preserve and then reactivate a performance, a subject explored by numerous artists since the early years of video art. Vito Acconci, in "Undertone" (1973), made direct address to the camera and acknowledged the presence of future viewers as witnesses to his monologue. If Acconci, along with Nan June Paik and other Fluxus artists, was primarily concerned with the distinction between the "real" and the "signal," Adrian Piper, in "Cornered" (Figure 6) co-opted the TV monitor to stage a continuous confrontation between her electronic representation and the viewer. She

Figure 6 "Cornered" by Adrian PIPER, 1988

systematically develops a discourse on racial identity, leaving no logical exit for the viewer to escape. She constantly reminds the viewer that racial prejudice is "not just my problem. It's our problem." Piper considers the direct confrontation "therapeutic" and "catalytic" (Berger 219), because the viewer is no longer an outsider watching in, but an insider obliged to deal

with the issue together with the artist.

Yang, Ching and myself share Piper's conviction in a performative engagement. Although our projects do not function at the confrontational level, we are equally committed to staging an immersive environment where the protagonist in the video directly addresses the viewer. This is particularly apparent in Yang's use of zoom-in and zoom-out to bracket each shot, creating the illusion that someone is approaching the viewer, speaking to him or her, and then moving back into the void. Michael Fried's criticism of theatricality in his 1967 article "Art and Objecthood" can be borrowed to describe precisely the viewer experience we aim to achieve: "there is an important sense in which the work in question exists for him alone, even if he is not actually alone with the work at the time. ... Someone has merely to enter the room ... to become that beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been waiting for him" (163).

In his original text, Fried went on to explain why he detested theatricality: "[the work] refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him. (Such isolation is not solitude any more than such confrontation is communion." What Fried failed to specify is *what* the artwork is isolating the viewer from. In my mind, it is the non-stop drone of the capitalist system, which enforces on everyone a myopic focus on the present. "I will die" confronts us with a basic fact that we have grown accustomed to ignoring. Its power, similar to that of Piper's aggressive monologue, lies precisely in its ability to shake us awake from the mental

sleep that the dominant culture hopes to lock us in.

What we hope to achieve, in addition to integrating the viewer into the experience, is for him to identify with the protagonist based on the human capacity for empathy and compassion. Artworks, in Piper's words, "extend our conception of reality ... beyond our immediate experience in the indexical present ... This leap is a necessary condition for experiencing compassion for others" (Kester 77). When we watch the doctor, the pregnant lady, the child, the old man repeating "I will die" in Yang's work, empathetic identification leads us to reflect upon the common vulnerability of human life. Moreover, motivated by our innate ability to emulate another person's action once we identify with him, we begin to imagine ourselves in the performative role. In this way, the TV monitor serves as a mirror for the viewers, comparable to the video camera in the first performance act for the collaborators.

Textbooks on professional video production frequently characterize the talking-head scenario as "tedious, unfilmic, and woefully inefficient in communicating ideas" (Shelton 151), yet it remains one of the favorite tools for artists working with video. The reason is twofold. As we are constantly bombed with commercial imagery edited at an unbreathable pace and filled with information that relentlessly conditions us, an unedited sequence with a single person positioned in the middle of the frame not only serves to allow a more personal communication, but it also accommodates a critical distance between the viewer and the image. This critical distance enables the viewer to construct an active relationship to the

image, and in turn to reality.

4. The anonymous protagonists

The projects of Yang, Ching and myself differ from Acconci and Piper's in one critical aspect: the artist is no longer the protagonist; the collaborators perform; they are numerous and anonymous. Seen in their ordinary clothes, encountered at ordinary places, they perform yet they do not dramatize. This quality of anonymity and ordinariness forms the basis for a stronger empathetic identification with the viewer, because in order for one person to identify with another, the two have to share something in common. Moreover, when faced by someone whose position is neither superior nor inferior, one is more likely to project an accurate image of himself or herself, like standing in front of a flat mirror, instead of a tilted one. For the majority of viewers, who are likely to perceive themselves as ordinary and anonymous, identifying with my parents – two retired teachers in their sixties – without idolizing them nor exoticizing them, is easier than with me who, as an artist, occupies a more privileged position within the art context.

Anonymity can also serve as a critique of authoritarian and grand narratives. In "Family History Textbook" cross-generational stories reveal a host of complex changes that have affected individual lives in China. Unlike official history, which is dominated by political movements, other forces – separation from nature, national and international migration, and technology transformations – become evident.

Candice Breitz's "Mother + Father," mentioned at the beginning of this essay, situates on the exact opposite of anonymity. Her all-star cast include Julia Roberts and Dustin Hoffman. The reason she uses mass culture "ready-made" is that "these forms of media expression represents a 'lingua franca,' a shared territory that can unite ... linguistic, cultural, and social experiences that would otherwise remain isolated from one another" (Beccaria). It is questionable to me how much of this "universal" language is developed by people of different languages and cultures, if not by studio producers in Hollywood. Her intention to "opening up, unhinging and fragmenting" the mass culture and consumer passivity in reality reinforces the stereotypes through false celebration.

Admittedly, anonymous testimonials do not guarantee authenticity. An element of performance and storytelling always accompanies the statement of facts. Cultural scholar Henry Jenkins, in his study of our reception of cultural media, contends that the viewer can "divide one's credibility," enjoying the mechanics of illusion while still submitting to the "narrative implications" (Verwoert 27). Thus a documentary video differs from a Hollywood film not so much in the degree of filmic illusion as in whose narrative it represents.

5. "Us" and "Other"

When we turn our camera to focus on others, there is always the danger of portraying others in the way we want to see them in. In Martha Rosler's words, "documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group

addressed as socially powerful" (263). The artist's haughty mission to emancipate the powerless very often degenerates into "exoticism, tourism, voyeurism ..." Similarly, in "The Artist as Ethnographer" Hal Foster criticizes how some artists of different periods have inherited the primitivism fallacy – that "over there" became "back then." He warns us against the danger of both "disidentification from the other" and "over-identification with the other" (203).

One way to steer away from the traps of the binary vision, "I vs. other," is to focus on "us." An understanding that has gained increasing resonance among activists and artists alike is that self-empowerment presents the most effective path, if not the only path, towards real social progress. Martha Rosler rightly questions "which political battles have been fought and won by someone for someone else?" Yang Zhenzhong and myself are not fighting political battles in our works, yet the way we have structured the relationships between the collaborators, the viewers and the artists exemplifies the same thinking. The subject of the work is something connected to the artists, not "the other." My family history, not someone else's, is the point of departure. In Yang's project, the ultimate death is the destiny shared by everyone, including the artist himself.

Yang conducted his experiment first in his native city Shanghai. In this setting, he belonged to the group identity the video enacted. Subsequently he traveled to seven other countries to re-create the project in each country's local language. When I watched all eight

versions, the Chinese one impacted me much more profoundly than the foreign versions, including those languages that I understand. Hearing the Chinese sentence "I will die" almost triggers a corporeal reaction; I am immediately reminded of the biological phenomenon. Listening to a foreign language requires a conscious mapping and I was constantly distracted by the clothes, the make-up, and the background. This experience indicates to me that the context of exhibition is as important as the context of creation. A work considered veritable to a local audience may seem exotic to a foreign one. This may be the reason why Yang has repeated the project in various countries so a local language version can be shown.

Unlike Yang and my works, which situate within the historical, geographical and cultural identity of the artists, Ching's work typifies another approach to looking at "us" – through the mirror of "the other." Several degrees of otherness exist in Ching's project. The location (PS1 studio in New York) is foreign to the artist, the collaborators are strangers, and the language used is foreign to the foreigners. Ching is clearly aware of these complexities and his decision to use language, in particular a statement that suggests significant emotional and cultural meaning, can only be seen as his intention to comment on this sense of otherness. Multiple interpretations of the sentence may be made: "I" could represent the speaker, or expansively signify visitors to his studio, New York residents, Americans, or even Westerners. "You" could indicate the teacher, the potential audience, the Chinese language or culture. In the process of teaching, Ching himself had to utter this statement repeatedly. For him, the

shifters carried another set of possible meanings.

Ching exhibited the video in Hong Kong in 2003. This "second act" is essential. If the first act was possibly a critique of naïve exoticism of many Americans on Chinese culture, by staging the work back in Hong Kong, Ching has turned the mirror back onto the Chinese. The work "attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other" (Foster 203). It confronts both Sinocentricism and Eurocentricism: many Chinese people disbelieve that foreigners are able to learn the Chinese language, yet they lavishly praise any foreigner who can barely say "hello" in Chinese.

6. Conclusion

The three projects I focused on in this essay have a number of qualities in common: interdependence of two performance acts, video camera as a stimulant and a mirror, anonymous performers, and critical use of language. They serve to illustrate one approach in combining video and performance to engage people both outside and inside the gallery space.

The risk for this kind of project to degenerate into "reality shows" or "idol contests" is omnipresent. Commercial television has been extremely effective in capitalizing on the public's compassion for the ordinary, anonymous "next-door neighbor" on one hand, and perpetual fascination with stardom on the other hand. Yet we should not simply give up an approach just because we are threatened by commercial abuse. If we continue to abolish valid experiments, then soon we will have no ground to stand on.

On another front, artists who pursue concrete interventions outside established art institutions may question our motive to include a second performance act that takes place within a gallery or museum. Long have artists and theoreticians criticized such a space for being separated "from the outer world" and thus "rendering itself and its hierarchization of values 'objective,' 'disinterested,' and 'true'" (Kwon 13). However, despite three decades of institutional critiques, the white cube remains the dominant channel for the majority of the public to interact with art. Laura Kipnis, in her essay "Repossessing Popular Culture," argued that "neither interpreting nor defying popular culture is enough; the point of populist intervention is to change it" (387). The same logic applies to the struggle against art institutions. If we simply shy away from galleries and museums, we will in effect have handed the ground to those works that submit to the culture of spectacles. The projects discussed in this essay suggest one way to link the gallery space to "the outer world," and demonstrate that social engagement and exhibitions are not mutually exclusive.

By no means I am suggesting that these works present the only possibility. Indeed, the Internet possesses a vast potential for artists to create process-based, performance projects that engage a wide spectrum of people fluidly. What I have called the first and second performance acts can become integrated since the Internet allows simultaneous participation and viewing. Yet several issues discussed in this essay will remain applicable – alignment of motive between artists and collaborators, framing of "us" and "other," and anonymity as a

critique.

I want to end this essay with a real story. One afternoon, as I walked into the Goethe Institut where my work "Family History Textbook" was being exhibited, I noticed that the cleaning lady had parked her cart in the middle of the gallery and put the headphone on to listen to my work. I had chatted with her while installing my work, but she never showed much interest in what I was doing. She saw me coming in and started to tell me her childhood story, how she immigrated back to China from Indonesia after the People's Republic was established in 1949. That moment, in my mind, epitomizes the reason why we pursue a performative engagement strategy.

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Combining Video and Performance: A Double Performative Engagement
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Three recent works by Chinese artists are the focus of this essay: Yang Zhenzhong's "I Will Die," Luke Ching's "Easy to Learn Cantonese, Chapter 1 I love you," and my own work "Family History Textbook." These projects can be considered as performances each with two acts – the first act is staged during the production phase of the video and the second one inside the gallery space when the video is exhibited. Several issues core to these projects are discussed: video is used in these projects as a stimulant, assisting the artist to create a communicative process with the participants; the talking head framing allows the viewer to construct an active relationship to the image, and in turn to reality; the anonymity of the protagonists in the videos serves as a critique of authoritarian narratives; artists approach their own history, identity and culture by focusing on "us" or by "framing the framer." Together these works illustrate one recent approach in combining video and performance art to not only engage different social groups outside the gallery space, but also create a reflexive linkage between them and the viewers inside.

本文主要討論三件中國藝術家的近作：楊振忠的"我會死的"，程展緯的"《Easy To Learn Cantonese》第一章:「我愛你」"，以及作者本人的"家庭歷史教材"。每件作品都可以被看作是擁有兩幕的表演：第一幕發生在錄像錄製的階段，而第二幕則是當錄像在畫廊中播放時。這些作品都涉及到以下幾個要點：錄像機是一個催化劑，幫助藝術家同參加錄像的合作者進行溝通；"大頭"的構圖反而能夠使觀衆保持一種主動性，從而更好的關注畫面，進而透視現實；錄像中

主角們保持的匿名性可被看作是對官方歷史的批評；藝術家聚焦在“我們”這個概念上，或是通過“他們”來反思“我們”。這三件作品反映了近期錄像藝術和表演藝術的一種新動向，就是通過二者的結合，藝術家不僅能夠讓畫廊外的不同社會群體參與到藝術作品中，而且能夠在他們和畫廊中的觀衆之間建立一個聯係，令觀衆反思自己的歷史、身份和文化。